



Teachers make a difference

STEVE DINHAM LOOKS AT THE MOST IMPORTANT SCHOOL-BASED FACTOR INFLUENCING A STUDENT'S LEARNING: HIGH-QUALITY TEACHERS LIKE YOU.

It used to be thought that schools and teachers made little difference to student achievement. Back in the 1960s, the prevailing view was that student achievement was largely determined by socioeconomic status (SES), family circumstances and innate ability. Research has powerfully refuted that view, and we now know of course that teachers, teaching and schools do make a significant difference to student achievement. The result has been a major international emphasis on improving the quality of teachers and teaching, especially since the 1980s.

Of course, research does show that SES and family background exert strong influences on student achievement, but it also shows that these are not life sentences. SES is about the opportunity and support, role models and encouragement available to

a student. It's not about innate ability or social-biological determinism. The facts are that while there is a relationship between SES and student achievement, poor achievement is spread across the SES spectrum. We have many high achievers in low-SES schools.

Of the school-based factors influencing a student's learning, the most important is the classroom teacher, along with the student's prior achievement. We now know how teacher expertise develops and we know what good teaching looks like, but we also know that teacher quality varies within schools and across the nation.

A quality teacher in every classroom

A quality teacher in every classroom is the ultimate aim, but how to achieve this is the big question and challenge.

Recently, we've seen some significant developments focusing on improving the quality of teaching and lifting student achievement, but in pursuing these developments, it's important that we don't widen the existing gaps between our highest and lowest performers.

These recent and current developments include:

- I the introduction of the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) for students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9
- I the development of a national curriculum after many years, even decades, of false starts
- I new financial relationships between the Commonwealth, state and territory governments through various partner-

ship agreements, including agreements addressing early childhood education, improving teacher quality, and literacy and numeracy

- I national standards for teachers at graduate, proficient, highly accomplished and lead teacher levels, along with national standards for leadership, with national certification of teachers against these standards and national accreditation of teacher education courses, and
- I the reconstitution of Teaching Australia as the Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership with responsibility for further developing national standards and teacher and leadership certification.

In 2008, Lawrence Ingvarson, Elizabeth Kleinhenz and I from the Australian Council for Educational Research completed a report for the Business Council of Australia titled *Teaching Talent: The best teachers for Australia's classrooms*. In that report, we argued that previous attempts to drive improvement in teacher quality and to attract, retain, recognise and reward accomplished teachers had largely failed. We also said that seemingly simplistic measures such

as paying teachers on merit or by results were also doomed to fail.

Present incremental salary and career structures for teachers are 19th-century industrial artefacts which see teachers' salaries peak too soon and at too low a level. We argued for a new, integrated national approach involving national teaching standards, levels of voluntary certification above the common and mandatory 'competent' level and commensurate financial rewards. At present, more than three-quarters of Australia's teachers are at the top of incremental salary scales where they earn approximately one-and-a-half times the salary of a beginning teacher. This difference is too small.

We made some other recommendations, including that:

- I teachers be drawn from the top quartile of secondary school graduates and from high-performing people entering teaching from other fields
- I teacher education courses and faculties or schools of education be accredited against national standards
- I beginning teachers receive high-quality support and guidance to prepare them for national certification or registration

as a competent teacher able to practice anywhere in Australia

- I specialist primary teachers of, for example, mathematics, science, literacy, information and communication technology, and languages, be recruited to support general teachers
- I high-quality, nationally accredited professional development programs for teachers and school leaders be developed to support the national curriculum and national testing
- I staff in schools be supported to use research, including research by schools in schools, to improve practice
- I salary and career structures be restructured to drive and reward higher levels of teacher accomplishment against national standards
- I supportive intervention be provided for schools and in areas which are under-performing against national benchmarks and standards
- I purpose-designed instruments be developed to gather data on a wide range of school performance indicators so that such data can be used diagnostically to foster further improvement

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Good teaching and good schools are the best means we have of overcoming disadvantage.

- I integrated services be co-located, especially in low SES areas, and
- I governments commit to significant investment to fund, evaluate and modify the above.

After a slow start and decades of talk, the pieces of the puzzle are now coming together quite quickly. Some are already in place. Others present challenges but will happen.

What is a high-quality educator?

High-quality educators are informed, critical consumers of educational research, seeking out what I call the 'three R's' of educational research – research that is relevant, rigorous and readable – because that's the research that can find acceptance and make a difference. Too much of educational research fails the three R's test.

High-quality educators question the evidence base for what they do and for any alternative method or innovation they and their colleagues might consider: they 'read the labels.' They're also aware of the false dichotomies that plague education. We've all been told that the best classrooms are teacher directed. We've also been told that the best classrooms are student centred. The truth is that the best classrooms are teacher directed *and* student centred.

Since we work in an age of evidence, high-quality educators gather and use data in sophisticated ways. At the moment there's something of a fixation with NAPLAN and My School, but we need broader evidence to guide our practice. The Melbourne Declaration of 2008 articulates two important goals for education in Australia: to promote equity and excellence; and to ensure all young Australians become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens. These goals serve as a very useful framework for the sorts of evidence we need to gather to assess our students and to guide our teaching and planning.

High-quality educators focus on every student as a learner and a person, and

because of that they're very important to their students.

My own research with successful teachers and schools in a range of countries shows that the best teachers and schools are continually striving to be better. Maybe that's why they're successful.

High-quality educators are not unreasonably defensive. As a teacher at a turnaround school where I had been conducting research put it, 'In this school we make plans now, not excuses.'

High-quality educators are aware of the values and principles that underpin their professional practice and are prepared to stand up for these, but are also prepared to change their mind when faced with convincing evidence, to paraphrase the great economist JM Keynes.

The biggest equity issue in Australian education today isn't computers, new buildings or equipment. It's each student having quality teachers and quality teaching in schools supported by effective leadership and professional learning in mutually respectful local community contexts.

I know life isn't fair, but I also know this: good teaching and good schools are the best means we have of overcoming disadvantage and opening the doors of opportunity for the young people of Australia. **T**

Professor Stephen Dinham is Research Director of the Teaching, Learning and Leadership research program at the Australian Council for Educational Research. His latest book is How to Get Your School Moving and Improving, published by ACER Press.

This is an edited version of his occasional address at the Faculty of Education Graduation Ceremony at the University of Southern Queensland in May.

REFERENCES

- Dinham, S., Ingvarson, L. & Kleinhenz, E. (2008). *Teaching Talent: The best teachers for Australia's classrooms*. Melbourne: Business Council of Australia.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT COMPLETED IN THE DIOCESE OF BALLARAT



Name : Olga Lyons

Course/PD Title: Coaching Workshop

Course/PD Description:

This workshop introduced and explored the effects of feedback and questioning as a means to developing reflection on teaching and learning. The session involved small group, interactive processes to allow opportunities for participants to trial some of the key aspects of giving and receiving effective feedback. The workshop drew on learning around collaborative and cognitive coaching theories and approaches, including framing reflective questions in order to encourage colleagues to see the strengths of their work and identify aspects of their teaching for improvement.

Facilitator/s: Kay Fletcher and Tamara Downey

Location: Halls Gap

Date/s: Wednesday 23 June 2010

No of hours: 5

VIT Standard/s covered by above course/PD:

PROFESSIONAL KNOWLEDGE		
1 <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Teachers know how students learn and how to teach them learn	2 <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Teachers know the content they teach.	3 <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Teachers know their students.
PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE		
4 <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Teachers plan and assess for effective learning.	5 <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Teachers create and maintain safe and challenging learning environments.	6 <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Teachers use a range of teaching strategies and resources to engage students in effective learning.
PROFESSIONAL ENGAGEMENT		
7 <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Teachers reflect on, evaluate and improve their professional knowledge and practice.	8 <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Teachers are active members of their profession.	

Larry Burn
DIRECTOR